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ABSTRACT

The paper examines policy implications of recent trends toward state mandated assessment of higher education services. Two differing purposes of assessment, that of academic improvement and that of accountability, are distinguished. Current trends in how policy makers and higher educators approach a "new accountability" include seeing assessment as a mechanism for actively shaping institutional agendas toward greater attention to instructional quality. External requisites for accountability are based on three broad policy directives: re-establishing credibility, expanding the base of resources, and creating a vision for the future. In contrast, internal requisites for accountability also involve three policy directives: recreating standards for student competence and achievement, sending a clear message on priorities, and revitalizing curriculum and instructional practice. Effective assessment requires a commitment for the long term and state leadership that will sustain assessment as a process with academic integrity. Contains 10 references. (DB)

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ASSESSMENT AND THE "NEW ACCOUNTABILITY": A CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION'S LEADERSHIP

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**ASSESSMENT AND THE
"NEW ACCOUNTABILITY":
A CHALLENGE FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION'S
LEADERSHIP**

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The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965. The primary purpose of the commission is to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education at all levels. Forty-nine states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are members. The ECS central offices are at 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427. The Washington office is in the Hall of the States, 444 North Capitol Street, Suite 248, Washington, D.C. 20001.

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INTRODUCTION *

Since emerging to prominence as a national issue in higher education some four years ago, the assessment of educational outcomes has been inextricably linked with accountability. Beginning as a reform movement internal to the academy with the publication of such reports as *Involvement in Learning* (NIE 1984) and *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (AAC 1985), the "high ground" of assessment was quickly seized by state policy makers who saw in assessment a powerful "lever for change" for improving quality in undergraduate education (ECS 1986, NGA 1986, Ewell 1985). Today, the majority of assessment activities occurring at American colleges and universities is due to state initiatives. Over half of the institutions responding to a national survey on the issue in 1989 claimed that their primary motivation was an existing or anticipated state mandate (El-Khawas 1989). More decisively, in a fall 1989 survey of state higher education agencies, more than three-quarters of the states reported a student assessment effort planned or in place (Ewell and Finney 1989).

Many observers have seen in this pattern a change of agenda. Initial institution-centered efforts at assessment have been characterized as oriented toward "academic improvement," while external mandates reflect a demand for greater "accountability." Public policy makers, in contrast, have long contended that the notions "accountability" and "improvement" are inseparable, and that delivering quality will achieve accountability. At bottom, both positions are right. Both are concerned with quality improvement and see in assessment an essential tool in achieving it. Both are also convinced that "assessment" cannot do the job alone. Their difference lies in the fact that for many at the state level the concept of "accountability" itself has changed, and with it the appropriate roles that state-based assessment is expected to play. Increasingly, state leaders are willing to become more proactive about needed changes. And they are increasingly unwilling to leave the definition and delivery of quality to higher education institutions alone.

The nature of this change, and its implications for assessment policy, are the topics of this paper. Its "database" is a series of nine case studies of state-based assessment initiatives undertaken over the last two years by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). The first year of ECS case-study work on state assessment policy focused on five states implementing assessment (Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, South Dakota and Virginia); here, appropriate analytical questions concerned the dynamics of policy formation and the pitfalls and politics of early implementation (Ewell and Boyer 1988). Case-study work in six states in 1988-89 (Florida, Illinois,

*Though the conclusion of this paper are my own, I must gratefully acknowledge the superb contributions of my colleagues in the field: in 1987-88, Carol Boyer of ECS, and in 1988-89, Joni Finney of ECS and Charles Lenth of State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). Their insight, patience and persistence have made this project possible.

New Jersey, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington) examined a more basic set of issues. Among them were the emerging uses and impacts of assessment information at the state level, and the integration of assessment with other available state policy mechanisms. In each state, interviews were conducted with a range of constituencies including legislators, governors and their representatives, coordinating board members and staff, and institutional representatives. Results were summarized thematically, taking care to recognize that each state provides a unique political, fiscal, and historical context within which the substance of policy must unfold. What follows therefore is an attempt to chart some common ground at a high level of generality, but in a form that will hopefully be both authentic and informative.

INGREDIENTS FOR A NEW ACCOUNTABILITY: A CHANGING VOICE

The case for a "new accountability" is rooted in what appears to be a fundamental shift in the way policy makers perceive the public role of higher education. This shift is visible in a changing language--in particular, in the issues, symbols and overtones that policy makers call on when attempting to describe what they expect from higher education. Perhaps because it is most familiar, this rhetoric often begins with costs. Recent comments on higher education by a number of governors at the President's "Education Summit" in September 1989 (Chronicle of Higher Education 1989) centered on costs--a traditional concern--but demonstrated a growing impatience with traditional arguments about why increased investments were necessary. Such comments are echoed by a legislator in all nine ECS case-study states. "You've got to give something to get something," one summarized, "the era of saying 'put the money on the stump and trust me' is over."

On the face of it, such comments provide few grounds for a fundamentally altered conception of "accountability." Clearly, legislators and the public have always been concerned about the manner in which public funds are invested in higher education, and have occasionally erected elaborate and intrusive controls over resource allocation and expenditure. If legislative voices stopped with these concerns, there would be little new to report. But they are different in character in at least three ways. First, greater "accountability" is not for the most part a rhetoric of disinvestment. Indeed, it is seen as a critical key to continued budgetary expansion. Governors such as Kean in New Jersey and Gardner in Washington (among the most outspoken critics at the "Education Summit") and legislators such as Bragg in Tennessee, Peterson in Florida, and Doria in New Jersey (prime sponsors for major spending bills on higher education in their respective chambers) believe that further increments in investment cannot be sold to their colleagues without some kind of demonstrated performance in return.

Secondly, concrete information about performance itself is increasingly advanced as the substance of "accountability" and as a key to achieving quality. Ironically, this demand is seen as less intrusive by its authors than are detailed expenditure controls. Far from stifling institutional creativity, many legislators believe that a performance-based approach to achieving quality can be both flexible and enabling--consistent with emerging "best practice" in corporate management. Most are therefore genuinely puzzled when higher education balks at collecting and applying information about performance; indeed, many profess astonishment that such information is not already firmly established.

Finally, if the substance of "accountability" is information about performance, its predominant form lies in a more proactive approach to public communication. For too long, many legislators claim, higher education has hidden behind residual deference and perceptions of complexity. In an atmosphere of rising costs and visible

shortfalls in what needs to be accomplished, this approach will no longer suffice. "I think that [higher education in this state] does not sufficiently understand the symbolic side of accountability," said one observer, "and they're missing a major opportunity."

This changing voice can be succinctly summarized in terms of five policy imperatives that are both persistent and pervasive in the testimony of board members and elected officials across states:

1. "Higher education is no longer an isolated enterprise." Unlike K-12 education, where deficiencies are seen as chronic and fundamental, higher education is perceived as unresponsive. Governors and legislators commonly made a connection between higher education and economic development or the demands of responsible citizenship. Most in addition saw public colleges and universities as insensitive to individual students and their needs--particularly in undergraduate education. At the same time, they stressed that higher education had paid little attention to developing meaningful partnerships with K-12 education. Finally, many had been personally frustrated in their attempts to obtain concrete answers from higher education officials to what they considered to be relatively straightforward questions about performance.
2. "You've got to give something to get something." Most of those interviewed were prepared to expand investment in higher education, so long as it could demonstrate its commitment to quality and its responsiveness to public needs. For the most part supporters of higher education, they lacked the tools to build a credible case for budgetary expansion with their colleagues. Information about performance and quality improvement was seen as a necessary condition to leverage funds and not, as most institutional leaders feared, a disguised retrenchment device.
3. "You're the professionals...you tell us." Behind a concern for information about performance, however, was little interest in dictating the details of accountability. The overwhelming sentiment among legislators was to allow higher education's leadership--"those closest to the problem"--to define how and across what dimensions such information should be provided. The primary issue for higher education was seen less as one of specific performance than of overall credibility: most were willing to allow higher education considerable flexibility so long as it was accompanied by a visible commitment to greater responsiveness.
4. "It can't be that complicated." An important perceived ingredient in credibility, however, was simplicity. Rather than masses of performance statistics, most legislators appear concerned with overall direction and a few carefully chosen "benchmarks" of performance. As a result, they are frustrated by the masses of uninterpreted statistics that form the growing substance of accountability. What they feel they need most is evidence that the enterprise is intelligently managed--that it knows where it is going and how to get there.

Well-articulated goals and planning statements are as much a part of this effort as are a range of undifferentiated performance statistics.

5. "You're about to miss the boat." Finally, throughout all interviews there was a sense that available time in which to forge new policy is limited. Education is currently high on the public agenda, and it will not long remain so. By continuing to view accountability in terms of "business as usual" higher education is seen to be missing an important opportunity to make its case and to garner new resources. Within another two or three years continuing unresponsiveness may force a shift in the political agenda to new tactics, and a shift in public attention to new issues.

Behind these changing voices, I believe, is a fundamental shift in how higher education as a public investment is perceived and managed. Once viewed primarily as a provided "public service" whose chief concerns were equitable access and operational efficiency, public higher education is increasingly being viewed as a strategic investment. As such, its major perceived payoff lies in such areas as enhanced economic development and increases in common skills among potential workers and citizens. While the traditional conception of accountability raises policy issues that are primarily distributional in character, the second embraces higher education as a productive system. And while the first is consequently focused largely on imperatives of maintenance and control, the second emphasizes the changes necessary to achieve a quality product.

Concretely, this change is visible in at least three recent state policy trends that echo the shifts in rhetoric outlined above. The first is a trend toward directed investment, visible in a range of addition-to-base funding mechanisms whose intent is to channel resources in support of identified state priorities. Examples in the nine case-study states include the Governor's Challenge Grant program in New Jersey; "Centers [or Funds] for Excellence" grants in Colorado, Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia; and more targeted quality enhancement efforts such as the "Chairs of Excellence" program in Florida. Such marginal funding mechanisms are often tied to explicit evaluative procedures stressing improved instructional quality and return on investment. Indeed, many of them have been used to fund the development of broadly-conceived learning assessment and improvement efforts at selected pilot institutions.

A second trend is a growing "trade-off" between greater management flexibility for higher education to address needed changes in return for information about results. This trend is visible in recent autonomy legislation granted to New Jersey's state colleges and in Hawaii's decision to remove its university system from the restrictions of operating under the state's rigid state financial and personnel controls in return for "performance assessment" administered through the legislative auditor's office. Not only does such a bargain reflect prevailing management wisdom with which legislators and state lay board members are increasingly familiar, but it also reflects the acknowledged failure of prior attempts to micro-manage change through direct intervention.

A final, highly visible, policy trend is an escalating demand for concrete information about student performance, visible in numerous emerging state-based assessment programs. All of the nine case-study states had or were implementing such programs--ranging from established testing and performance funding approaches in Florida and Tennessee to emerging, more institution-centered approaches in the remaining states. Despite their apparent diversity all nine state assessment approaches were initially conceived by policy makers as part of a range of integrated policy tools deployed in support of a coherent state strategy. All, at bottom, were concerned with inducing changes in instructional practice that resulted in improvements in quality. In more than a few cases, however, policy integration did not survive implementation. Faced with the intricacies of managing a complex, multi-faceted initiative, state authorities often treated assessment policy in isolation--a "train on its own track" (Ewell and Boyer 1988). And once on its own track, assessment proved at best an indifferent policy tool to induce institutional change.

Repeated loss of coherence regarding the place of assessment in larger state change strategies demands renewed policy attention to the specific roles of state higher education governing and coordinating agencies. Above all, achieving accountability within a framework of quality improvement requires policy "brokering" between the external function of demonstrating return on investment on the one hand, and that of appropriately managing required institutional changes on the other. It is a proactive strategy, demanding both articulation and visible leadership. Viewed externally, "accountability" in this sense is primarily a question of communication, with a particular focus on providing evidence of responsible stewardship of public resources consistent with societal needs and priorities. Here the emphasis must increasingly shift from "accounting" for existing investments through expenditure control to leveraging new ones through demonstrated results; "assessment" becomes an effective way to sell the additional resources required to sustain a transformatory role for higher education. Viewed internally as a mechanism for directed change, the connection between "assessment" and "accountability" is also more dynamic. Rather than being used to police existing institutional instructional practice through inspecting its products against minimum standards--a dominant current institutional metaphor for state-based assessment practice--assessment is increasingly viewed as a mechanism for actively shaping institutional agendas toward greater attention to instructional quality.

THE EXTERNAL AGENDA FOR ACCOUNTABILITY: MAKING THE CASE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

"Public accountability" has always involved a communications component. Its substance consists not only in having actually discharged assigned responsibilities but also in making an effective case that this has in fact occurred (Jones and Ewell 1987). Traditionally, however, such communication has been post hoc; that is, "accountability" reporting occurs after a set of activities takes place, primarily to ensure that they are consistent with original intent.

The "new accountability" demands a much more proactive approach to communication. First, it is founded as much upon articulating ends as upon justifying means. This implies using a range of mechanisms, including assessment, to present a clear picture of where the state's higher education system intends to go and how it intends to get there. Second, it involves providing broad performance information keyed primarily toward the achievement of quality goals. This implies the ability to supply concrete bodies of evidence about student abilities and attainments, though it need not imply using common indicators across a diverse body of institutions. Finally, it involves recognition that increased resources can be obtained only if the first two conditions are met. As a result, the focus of communication is on the proactive use performance information to help higher education's political supporters make the case for increased funding.

External requisites for accountability can be described in terms of three broad policy directives derived from the experiences of case-study states. In each case, the directive refers to an overall state strategy, involving partnership between higher education's political supporters and those (primarily in state agencies) responsible for overall policy direction. Though indirect participants, institutions must also be made aware of this strategy, and must recognize its potential collective benefits.

1. Re-establishing Credibility. A first item on the agenda is to actively address diminishing levels of confidence in higher education felt by legislators, executives, and the wider public. Above all this requires clear recognition that while the perceived "problem" is generally one of quality improvement, it is not usually one of specific performance. Unlike K-12 education, higher education in the case-study states was not generally seen as an area characterized by extreme underperformance, requiring radical measures in response. "They don't think anybody's ripping them off," summarized one key executive staff member in Virginia. Most interviewees in contrast, noted that current perceptions of reasonable performance offered a unique opportunity for improvement. But many were quick to note that a primary issue was loss of confidence--what one legislative staffer aptly labeled "the symbolic side of accountability." For the most part, this was less a matter of demonstrating performance in detail than of building a credible case that higher education "knew what it was doing," was concerned about instructional quality, and was fundamentally well managed. A

Washington legislator put it well: "We want to achieve a level of comfort on this issue so we can leave it alone."

Equally clearly, legislative "discomfort" was founded upon a failure of traditional accountability mechanisms to build the required confidence. Budgetary control systems were often seen as inefficient and too much subject to manipulation: one legislator called them "a shell game." External approval mechanisms such as accreditation were seen as having "lost all credibility." Program review processes such as those conducted by Florida's Board of Regents or the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) were viewed more favorably, but were not directed clearly enough toward questions of instructional quality and return on investment. "When we mention program review [to legislators]," complained a higher education staffer in Illinois, "their eyes glaze over."

What has been the role of state assessment policy in helping to re-establish credibility? Most important was the simple fact that information about performance was being visibly collected with the promise that it be used. In New Jersey, Virginia and Tennessee--all states with initiatives that had been in place for at least three years--legislators knew very little about the way assessment was structured or what kinds of information was being collected. But they were sufficiently comfortable with the initiative itself that they also showed little interest in finding out. As a New Jersey legislator put it, "the fact of assessment is more important than what they end up doing." In all three states, unilateral action by boards and institutions to establish such programs helped purchase considerable discretion in how they should be structured.

In states where legislative involvement in assessment was more direct, "credibility" payoffs depended upon a mixture of what was done and what was found. A major beneficiary of the "rising junior" CLAST examination in Florida, for example, was the state's community college sector. Here, satisfactory pass rates on the examination for AA graduates acted to counter charges of "grade inflation" and "watered-down classes" that had been frequently leveled at the community colleges. At the same time, state community college board staff were able to use evidence of deficiency to garner additional needed funds for developmental and college preparatory work. Not only did the scores themselves help make the point, but their ready availability aided legislative "confidence-building" by sustaining the impression that state board officials knew the nature of their problem and how to deal with it. This effect was echoed in Tennessee, where Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) staff reported that information gathered through the state's "performance funding" program has had a major impact on their ability to talk credibly to the legislature. "I spend the first fifteen minutes [of legislative hearings] being able to talk about the progress that's been made," reported the Director of THEC, "and this is very impressive to them because you don't just lead with the budget."

Put simply, the visible presence of performance information "signals" good management. And with a few exceptions, it is good management, not specific performance that for most policy makers defines the substance of accountability.

2. Expanding the Base of Resources. In the majority of case-study states, "assessment" first arose as an element of public policy in a context of resource expansion. Only in Missouri and South Dakota was the predominant tone of the initiative to achieve greater efficiencies on an existing base. Contrary to the fears and perceptions of most institutional observers, assessment was seen by the majority of state policy makers primarily as a means to politically make the case for increased revenue. "The public won't stand for any more tax increases without this," reported a key Tennessee legislator on the origins of that state's Legislative Goals process, "you can't just raise dollars and spend them any more."

Perhaps the most explicit linkage of this kind occurred in the state of Washington. Here, the Higher Education Coordinating Board's Master Plan included both a sophomore testing provision and a mechanism intended to re-establish on a new basis support for a notoriously underfunded higher education system. If adopted, the Master Plan's proposed funding mechanism would both expand the total pot available and would decrease controls over targeted expenditure. But such an approach eliminated "legislative self-assurance"; in the words of one legislator, "we had to make sure that this funding wasn't just seen as an entitlement." Swapping funding for assessment was thus a necessary part of the strategy for selling the Plan politically. Given this context, lack of institutional enthusiasm was viewed with some puzzlement by state policy makers. It was clear to them that non-cooperation would not result in "punishment," but rather in "a major lost opportunity" for the institutions to improve their position.

In part, the need for new methods to justify increased funding is due to the visible inadequacy of traditional arguments and traditional mechanisms for leveraging funds. In particular, legislators in several states exhibited impatience with traditional contentions (usually put in the mouths of Presidents at legislative hearings) that the primary need was for additional base funding "to uplift the entire system" of higher education. Not only did such arguments tend to substantiate the image of "entitlement" funding, but they also seemed to suggest that higher education leaders did not understand their own "production functions" sufficiently to know where and how to invest additional resources.

At the same time, traditional mechanisms for justifying additional funding based on enrollment growth were no longer adequate. As one official put it in Virginia, a major current policy problem for higher education is that "we don't know how not to fund growth." In Tennessee, performance funding was first mooted because of fears about enrollments topping out and the consequent

inability of the formula to raise additional dollars. The notion of performance funding was less a mechanism for changing institutional behavior than a means of "raising legislative aspirations" that would be visible in increased overall funding. "We did have a naive notion that the institutions would do good things," recalled an original architect of the program, "but the shift to 'assessment' was very much an afterthought." By demonstrating that it was possible to break the linkage between dollars and enrollments and still be fair, noted another, performance funding "got us out of a mentality"; as a consequence, "it was a foot in the door for a lot of other things" to be undertaken in the realm of quality improvement. Most importantly, in Tennessee performance funds are "not just another eighteen million dollars." Instead, in the opinions of THEC's leadership, "they are the key to selling the other ninety-five percent."

Given this linkage, it is no coincidence that some of the most visible assessment initiatives occurred in states that were consciously attempting to improve their competitive positions in higher education through a broad-based quality improvement effort. In Florida, CLAST was only one part of a comprehensive package of reforms and investments initiated by Governor Graham in the mid-seventies, intended to move Florida from its position as "just another good Southern state." In New Jersey, the College Outcomes Evaluation Program (COEP) was also part of a range of Department of Higher Education (DHE) policy initiatives intended to move the state's public higher education system from a "backwater" to a position of national prominence.

Acknowledging assessment's link to resource expansion, however, compels equal recognition that in its absence assessment has little political constituency of its own. In Virginia, where the public purpose of assessment is to encourage long-term institutional improvement, additional authorization had to be written into the code for the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV); absent this authorization, it was felt that raising funds to support assessment would be difficult. In New Jersey, FY 1990 budget shortfalls hit COEP harder than it did many programs--partly because of intensive lobbying by opposing institutions, but partly because it was difficult to mobilize legislative support in hard times for a program that would only "gather information." Ironically, these examples provide further support for the contention that assessment and resource expansion are politically linked; if the legislative agenda shifts to cost control, most legislators feel that there are much more straightforward ways to identify needed cuts than through expensive and dubious testing processes.

3. Creating a Vision for the Future. Re-establishing credibility and making the case for additional resources are largely conditioned by a third element of the external agenda: publicly communicating a clear direction for future investment. Here assessment has an important role to play because the process itself forces unusual attention to explicit goal-setting. Commenting on this phenomenon most clearly was former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, now President of the University of Tennessee: "assessment itself is not a goal

but it forces you to set goals," he emphasized, "and if you can clearly show what you're doing and how you got there, having clear goals may in itself be sufficient to get accountability."

Linkages between assessment and statewide goalsetting can occur in many ways. In New Jersey, the COEP program was seen as having an important impact on delineating needed skills for the future. This, in turn, was "changing thinking" about how the state's system for higher education should be organized. In Virginia, assessment and creating an agenda proceeded in parallel. SCHEV's "Commission on the University of the 21st Century"--a broad-based and highly visible planning effort, represents in the words of its director, "an attempt to seize the intellectual high ground" by creating a statewide vision for the future. Coupled with a decentralized assessment initiative, this approach is seen as heading off some of the problems of tying accountability directly to comparative performance. Finally, in Washington, complementary initiatives were visibly present in a single Master Plan. Regardless of its substantive merits, the Plan itself represented an important rallying point for uniting institutional and political interests. Indeed, institutions in Washington, most of which strongly opposed the Plan's sophomore testing initiative, were unusually careful about managing their opposition because they realized that it was in their own interest to ensure that the newly created and politically fragile Higher Education Coordinating Board was successful.

Of equal importance as having a vision, however, is the ability to articulate it. In Illinois, where assessment efforts were embodied in a carefully-designed comprehensive review of undergraduate education, legislative staff felt that the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) had "been successful academically, but not politically." Program review reporting was seen as too detailed to give an overall picture of system direction; one noted favorably a brochure recently published by the state's association of independent colleges, and felt that a similar "report to shareholders" was badly needed in public higher education. IBHE staff, in contrast, persistently resist a "USA Today mentality" in external reporting, maintaining that "you can't win accountability by simply slapping numbers on the table." This discontinuity loomed important last spring when increases in higher education funding were contingent upon a new tax package, and when in this context the Governor called upon the IBHE to publicly address questions of "accountability and productivity." The sentiment behind this request was expressed succinctly by members of the Governor's staff: "All we are asking is that higher education define its goals and then tell us; how can they expect a tax increase if they don't show us what they are doing?" Although higher education in Illinois ultimately did obtain the expected tax increase without a "master planning" effort, this was in part due to the fact that the IBHE enjoyed high initial credibility with the Governor and legislature; in other states, such a recovery might not have been possible.

This final external requisite of accountability, in sum, encompasses both prior requirements. But it adds the desirability of fusing them in the form of a set

of consistent, simple messages about higher education's plans and its commitment to quality. As demonstrated in Washington and Virginia, planning itself can be an element in establishing credibility. The role of assessment in supporting this strategy is that it can render proposed "visions of the future" more concrete (and therefore more understandable), and that it suggests a means for actually recognizing quality attainment once it has been achieved.

Addressing these three requisites effectively above all demands that state assessment policy be coherently organized in terms of an overall strategy for addressing undergraduate improvement. This strategy may be apparent and overtly linked, as in Washington and to some degree in Tennessee, Florida, New Jersey and Colorado; or it may consist of discrete initiatives that work toward common ends as in Virginia. But a strategy of some kind must be actively present and communicated. Success in these endeavors, however, depends upon two additional factors, both of which are tied directly to assessment policy.

One is the presence of a coherent state-level planning database which can be used both to support goal-setting and to report consistently about progress made. New Jersey's SURE (Student Unit Record Enrollment) reporting system, for example, was established at least in part to enable DHE to provide regular information of this kind. Similarly, performance funding in Tennessee has generated a range of useful reporting statistics for tracking quality improvement. In Florida, moreover, lack of an integrated reporting system that combines CLAST test scores, placement test scores, and enrollment information considerably hampers efforts to determine overall policy. CLAST scores in particular, because they have been seen only in terms of certifying individual students, have been largely inaccessible as a means for evaluating system effectiveness.

A second condition of success is a consistent mechanism for communicating actions taken to improve performance. For most legislators, the primary criterion in terms of which to judge the "success" of a reform is visible change in behavior. Actions taken in response to state initiatives are likely to speak louder than actual data on effectiveness. As a result, highlighting these promptly and regularly can pay considerable dividends. Most such actions, of course, will be at the institutional level, and it is important to move examples quickly into public consciousness. Indeed, institutional responsiveness itself emerged as perhaps the best single "bottom line" of performance among legislators in case-study states. As a Washington legislator put it, the clearest indicator of success would be for the institutions themselves "to show that they're interested, and that they're willing to change."

THE INTERNAL AGENDA FOR ACCOUNTABILITY: STATE POLICY AS AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

Under the "new accountability," external and internal agendas are difficult to disentangle. Credibility, expansion, and vision are one side of a process that must also involve a range of strategies intended to actualize and institutionalize needed change. Implementing state-level change strategies in the arena of undergraduate education, however, has always been a tricky business because it involves carefully balancing external stimuli and incentives with the recognition that lasting and effective action must come from within (Ewell 1985). In the realm of assessment, case study states manifested this tension in many ways, conditioned by the resource and governance contexts within which state authorities had to operate, and by a range of institutional cultures.

Nevertheless, all states faced similar dilemmas with regard to assessment policy as an ingredient in quality improvement. One was the difficulty of avoiding a "compliance response"--one oriented more toward answering the letter rather than toward fulfilling the spirit of state policy. State agency respondents, for example, often expressed the difficulty of getting institutions to forego "cosmic game playing" within any proposed set of assessment guidelines or regulations. Ironically, raising the stakes or articulating regulations more precisely sometimes had the unintended effect of isolating the institution's response from faculty and line academic administrators--the local agents for academic reform. In Tennessee, faculty sometimes viewed performance funding as administrative territory because dollars were involved; similarly in Virginia, at institutions with large amounts of incentive funding riding on development of an "acceptable" assessment plan, assessment reporting was sometimes seen as "too important" to allow substantial faculty participation. At the same time, proactive creation of an academic "vision" for the future (as in New Jersey or Virginia) was often seen by institutions as an inappropriate state role. As a state higher education official put in Virginia, "our raising epistemological questions always makes the institutions nervous."

"Internal" requisites for accountability can also be described in terms of three broad policy directives. The focus is again in each case on a state-level "strategy" for improving quality of which assessment policy is an integral part.

1. Recreating Standards for Student Competence and Achievement. An important exception to the general lack of specific perceived deficiencies in higher education on the part of legislators is in the area of academic standards--particularly in the early years of undergraduate study. Here, two distinct concerns are intertwined. First, legislators and lay board members are disturbed by fragmentary but persistent evidence about low levels of basic skills possessed by typical college students. In Washington, the Chairman of the Higher Education Coordinating Board, based on his experience as a businessman, had some clear opinions about shortcomings in communications skills, and these perceptions played a dominant role in the decision to include

sophomore testing in the Master Plan. Second, there are concerns about fragmentation in the undergraduate curriculum resulting in too little commonality and integration. As one Tennessee legislator put it, "all students ought to come out of college knowing something about the world and about themselves."

To address the first concern, state policy makers were inclined at least to propose, and sometimes to implement, the classic K-12 solution: standardized testing of common outcomes. Four of the nine case-study states (Florida, Tennessee, New Jersey, and South Dakota) at some point invested in this approach, while it was concretely proposed as a policy option in at least two more. But only in Florida did the approach chosen completely emulate the K-12 solution of universal "gateway" testing. In each of the other states, testing was intended to provide institution-level performance information, and with the exception of Tennessee's use of the ACT-COMP exam as an ingredient in performance funding, the process did not involve high stakes for the institutions.

In many ways a special case, Florida's "rising junior" CLAST examination illustrates both the policy benefits and drawbacks of common testing. Its origins lie in a statewide design for undergraduate education that places unusual reliance on the articulated role of community colleges. Within this context, CLAST was intended primarily as a direct quality control device: if AA transfer degrees were mandated to be fully transferable, an "upper-divisional entrance examination" was deemed necessary to ensure consistent levels of preparation among transfers. In this role, for the most part, state policy makers in Florida believe that the examination has achieved its intended purpose.

But both higher education policy leaders and those directly responsible for test administration acknowledge that testing mechanisms such as CLAST have severe limitations as general policy tools. First, because it serves as a "gate," CLAST is limited to the assessment of minimum skills; pass rates average over 90% and coverage is limited to essential communications, computational and reasoning skills. As a result, test scores do not provide good outcomes measures of a multi-faceted collegiate experience. Indeed, some in Florida have argued that really looking at CLAST performance could actively harm higher education's credibility with respect to quality because the skill levels required for successful performance are so low. This was an issue also faced by other states. In New Jersey, the decision was made to develop a sophisticated task-based "General Intellectual Skills" (GIS) examination for common administration to sophomores, but a major concern was that the relatively high levels of skill required for successful performance on such an examination would unfairly discriminate against community colleges.

Secondly, test scores have only partial utility in guiding policy because their actual informational content is limited. In Florida, CLAST scores are not

aggregated for policy purposes and only overall pass-rates are reported. Furthermore, because CLAST is a minimum requirement for progress, many students (especially in the more selective four-year institutions) are advised to take the examination as soon as they enroll as freshmen--completely obviating the possibility of using scores as collegiate outcomes measures. Use of the ACT-COMP examination in Tennessee has been subject to similar difficulties. Within the context of performance funding, the relative "unambiguity" of a test score as a funding device is seen as highly attractive. But concerns about equity in institutional allocations perpetually resurfaced as the examination produced results that were seen as anomalous or uninterpretable. Finally, in Washington, a common sophomore testing proposal was dropped after a large-scale pilot test suggested the limited utility of obtained results in guiding concrete academic quality improvements.

Most importantly, use of a common testing mechanism can be politically dangerous as it creates powerful winners and losers. In Florida, this was most visible in debates about whether or not higher pass-rate standards for CLAST, scheduled for 1989, should in fact be implemented because of adverse impact on minorities. In South Dakota, fears about institutional comparisons led first to a three-year moratorium on releasing the results of common testing, and ultimately to the abandonment of the program. Finally, in New Jersey, a severe revenue shortfall provided an occasion to solidify institutional opposition to the GIS examination. Resulting lobbying killed its legislative fiscal support, though the examination was ultimately implemented using resources drawn from the Governor's contingency fund.

These examples illustrate some dilemmas involved in using an assessment mechanism directly to recreate standards. More notable have been some positive indirect effects, whether or not they involve common outcomes measures. In New Jersey, a COEP task force on student learning provided a visible public occasion for discussing expected common levels of collegiate functioning. Even if no test had resulted from these deliberations, the discussions themselves had a notable impact on faculty opinions and behavior. In Florida, state efforts to address common standards proceeded in parallel with CLAST, primarily in the form of direct curricular interventions such as the "Gordon Rule." At the community colleges, one result has been more uniform expectations about the level and kinds of work to be expected of students enrolled in first-year college courses. And impacts of this kind were not confined to states with overt testing mechanisms. In Virginia, community college representatives noted considerable "cross-fertilization" among campus-centered assessment efforts and the deliberations of a systemwide task force on general education. A similar secondary effect occurred among community colleges in Illinois. Under the auspices of the Illinois Mathematics Association, math teachers at all levels have convened to determine common college preparatory skill levels.

On the one hand, assessment policy can directly create higher standards through establishing an intrusive quality control mechanism based on minimum standards. But its greatest long-term impact appears indirect: in inducing continuing discussions about what levels of performance should be expected of college students and about how these abilities might be concretely recognized and induced.

2. Sending a Clear Message on Priorities. State assessment policy can also exert a powerful effect on the ways institutions construct their own agendas with respect to quality undergraduate education. Indeed, it was this effect that most state policy makers identified as the most significant result that assessment had to date achieved. As one Florida legislator put it, "it's the message that we're sending, not the scores themselves."

One "message" addresses the relatively low priority accorded to undergraduate education at most institutions, and particularly its general education component. Given this concern, a commonly-reported effect of assessment was simply to refocus attention. In Virginia, for example, an academic vice-president noted that assessment has "legitimized the whole conversation about undergraduate education." In Illinois, campus representatives observed that one impact of the IBHE's comprehensive review of undergraduate education had been "to force holistic thinking about curriculum and instruction." In both states, assessing general education proved particularly challenging, partly because few campus-level structures were in place to provide an organizational focus. In Illinois, this became evident when program review procedures that were normally anchored in academic departments were applied to undergraduate education as a whole.

A second "message" centers on higher education's overall responsiveness. Often, this is embodied in a view that colleges and universities should become more visibly "service oriented" with respect to their "customers." Some legislators initially expressed this sentiment in the form of dissatisfaction with the amount of faculty time typically spent in the classroom. Others referred to "customer complaints" about such varied issues as inaccessible faculty, complex bureaucratic procedures or indifferent teaching. In several states, one manifestation of heightened concern was an increase in legislative "provisos" intended to address such issues. In Illinois, for example, a bill had just been passed barring teaching assistants with limited English skills from the classroom. Here the role of assessment was seen as particularly effective in promoting action directed toward quality improvement. In Tennessee, required student surveys uncovered several such problems that could be quickly addressed. One, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was the quality of teaching assistants. Student satisfaction data in this case both allowed early identification of the problem and, when repeated, provided convincing evidence that the institution had taken effective action.

In using assessment policy to "shift attention" toward quality improvement, however, particular care is required to ensure that unintended messages are not sent. One effectiveness indicator used in performance funding in Tennessee, for example, is the proportion of an institution's accreditable programs that are in fact accredited; an inadvertent result has been to strengthen the hand of professional programs at the expense of traditional disciplines. In other states, institutions reported that assessment and other state policies sent contradictory messages: while assessment policies created incentives to direct resources and attention toward improved instruction, parallel budgetary incentives embedded in other state programs led in precisely the opposite direction.

3. Revitalizing Curriculum and Instructional Practice. Raising "epistemological questions" about instructional practice on the state level and inducing visible action in response is probably the most challenging ingredient of the "new accountability." Like its external counterparts, it involves both a changing state role and a consequent shift in "appropriate" organizational relationships. With the exception of recreating standards and demanding shifts in attention, however, the precise nature of these changes remains largely for institutions to determine. As part of an overall state strategy, therefore, the most important intent of assessment policy is indirect: in the words of one legislator, "to get the faculty themselves to really look at what they do."

One manifestation is simply to induce such self-examination--what a key state agency official in Virginia aptly termed "restlessness" in the curriculum. In most states, this kind of questioning occurred as a natural outcome of assessment once the campuses began to get on with the task. In Illinois and Virginia, where the architecture of assessment was unusually decentralized, this outcome was particularly visible. In both states, institutional representatives repeatedly cited positive curricular "process" effects that they felt were considerably more important in achieving quality than directly measurable "products"--effects that were probably unobtainable in other ways. Ironically, however, "process" effects were often predicated on prior "opposition." In Washington, substantive faculty involvement began only when a task force was formed to study (and to ultimately reject) the Master Plan's sophomore testing provision; opposition "coalesced" key faculty into a core of knowledge and interest that is now being effectively harnessed as each institution attempts to determine its own assessment approach. Successful efforts to mobilize faculty in support of assessment at Kean College in New Jersey were equally founded, in part, upon active opposition to COEP. Similarly, in Virginia, few faculties appear willing to "take the easy way out" of administering a standardized test in response to the state's mandate; as a result, noted SCHEV staff members, "they're unable to duck the responsibility of getting really involved." By avoiding too specific direction, state policy makers in such cases promoted maximally effective local initiatives to improve teaching practice. In the best cases, these became, "part of the living culture of the institution," and were visible in its overall curricular approach. Some of the most notable examples,

in fact, were those in which institutions used assessment to help argue for new curricula in a case made to the state.

But less directive approaches also encountered substantial limits. Here, perhaps the most important was uneven development due to variations in the commitment of institutional leadership. In each state, several examples emerged of institutions that used an assessment initiative proactively to address quality issues of local importance. "As long as faculty understand that this is not just intended to feed the Great Molloch somewhere," noted an institutional representative in Illinois, "they see that assessment could easily become a vehicle for what we've wanted to do all along." But such cases were far from the rule, because many institutions--at least initially--elected to adopt a strategy of minimum compliance. Here institutional leaders felt it would be impossible to divorce assessment from issues of autonomy and appropriate governance. Choosing minimum compliance, most supported their position by citing what they perceived to be "intrusive" state action in response.

The result was a real dilemma for state authorities, who then had to decide whether to escalate further and risk undermining their preferred strategy of building local ownership for instructional improvement. In Virginia, for example, institutions that had proposed nothing substantive in the assessment of general education were urged to adopt a standardized test "as a placeholder"; this reinforced institutional claims that what the state really wanted was a standardized test. Furthermore, in Virginia, certifying the existence of a sound local process meant requiring institutions to report as evidence some kind of results; again this sent the expected signal that the results themselves were important, rather than the process of critical self-examination that produced them. Developing appropriate state policy under these conditions often involved a very careful orchestration of incentives and actions. In Virginia, these included adequate fiscal support for institutions undertaking high-quality efforts, a flexible but relatively unambiguous set of policy guidelines, and a good deal of reassurance.

Other states sought to avoid the dilemma of uneven development by being more directive from the outset. As a THEC staff member emphasized, "in an RFP-like assessment process [as in Colorado or Virginia] you lose control over what is happening." Consequently, state policy makers increased the specificity of performance funding guidelines in Tennessee partly to raise the "center of gravity of the entire system" with respect to assessment practice, knowing that this might negatively affect such leading institutions as the University of Tennessee-Knoxville where local processes had already taken hold. In Florida, moreover, where some state officials unashamedly termed their approach a "coercive change model," the result was a comparatively uniform curricular response. Finally, COEP's "mix" of directive and locally-controlled elements in New Jersey is intended to provide minimal but visible uniformity of effort. DHE staff believe ultimately that "faculty, when confronted with facts, will do something with them," but they are also mindful of expressed legislative

common concerns about quality performance. "We can't just have the institutions doing their own thing here," said one, "we have no choice."

Many apparent differences in assessment policy, however, are really differences in how assessment is conceived within a larger state strategy of quality improvement. In states as different as Virginia, Tennessee, and Florida, policy makers agreed that assessment, in itself, was an indifferent policy tool to directly induce needed changes in institutional behavior. Most preferred budgetary devices such as incentive funding or challenge grants or, less frequently, direct regulation. But, in the words of one, "these things fit together." Assessment's unique contribution, most concurred, was to continually focus distracted faculty attention on issues of teaching practice; if and when a shift of attention occurred, most agreed, it was probably more effective for state policy to stay out of the way.

CONCLUSION

These ingredients for a "new accountability" collectively constitute a significant challenge for higher education. Meeting them effectively will require a fundamental shift in perspective for the leadership of both institutions and of statewide higher education governing and coordinating agencies. If the "new accountability" is real, a substantially more proactive state leadership strategy is called for--one that attempts to actively shape institutional agendas to embrace improvements in quality while at the same time providing institutions with sufficient resources and decision latitude to flexibly undertake needed innovations. At the same time, institutional leadership, and through it the faculty, must come to recognize the legitimate basis for this strategy--that colleges and universities must ultimately serve and reflect wider public purposes. At every level, considerable statesmanship will be required.

Assessment policy constitutes the key new ingredient in a state strategy designed to meet the challenge of the "new accountability." Above all, this is because improving quality means paying attention to results. Information about results is not only a necessary condition for charting progress, but it also visibly signals the need for renewed commitment. By its very nature, assessment makes inevitable an eventual look at curriculum, at teaching strategies, and at academic policies--the essence of what colleges and universities actually do in the realm of undergraduate education. Other available state policy levers, while powerful, do not lead so quickly to the heart of the academic enterprise. At the same time, if through their own leadership institutions can be induced to take ownership of the process, resulting changes can be significant. Faculty too are often discontented about instructional quality, and many of their concerns are congruent with those of the wider public. If assessment can engage them on their own terms, as an educational rather than a political enterprise, experience has shown that enduring and appropriate changes can be expected from within.

But assessment cannot do the job alone. Rather, it must work within a carefully crafted approach to systemic improvement. Other directed change mechanisms such as categorical funding or program review and approval, and traditional regulatory functions such as personnel policies or accounting/budgeting procedures will also have a part to play, and changes intended to foster quality should be expected in all of them. But the key is coordination. Above all, state leadership must avoid constructing situations where institutions are induced to respond to such initiatives piecemeal.

With regard to assessment, three things in particular are required of state leadership. First, it must be apparent from both established policy and ongoing action that assessment is a commitment for the long term. Institutions cannot be expected to take ownership of a process that will require several years to show meaningful results, if in another two years there is yet another new initiative to respond to. Both faculty and local administrators must be able to see a long-term character in assessment policy--in its timelines, its levels of support, and in the integrity of the required

process. More importantly, faculty and institutional leadership must be shown that engaging in meaningful assessment pays off. Institutions that are taking the task seriously should see a consistency in message regarding instructional quality and should be promptly reinforced when what they have learned through assessment appears in other state communications or processes. In the long term, moreover, consistency demands that meaningful levels of resources be directed toward exploiting the opportunities and addressing the problems that assessment uncovers. State leaders cannot expect institutions to determine and sustain quality improvement locally if they do not first set a consistent example.

Finally, state leadership must sustain assessment as a process with academic integrity. Despite their unease about current instructional quality, faculty and institutional leaders have little interest in participating in an irksome exercise that they see largely directed toward bureaucratic ends. Assessment is different from most state policies because it engages institutions with what they actually do. On the one hand, this renders assessment unusually threatening: it places the public interest within the academic enterprise in a fashion that faculty find impossible to ignore. But assessment can also indicate genuine interest and concern about improvement if it is raised as a tangible part of compelling intellectual issues centered on how students actually learn, how curricula and teaching methods actually function, and how this process might collectively be improved. This will require an openness to new methods and new answers in assessment technology on the part of state policy. It will also require trust that once faculty and institutions have been given responsibility for improvement that they will appropriately follow through. Absent these conditions, mandated assessment will remain intellectually isolated, and improvement will become mere compliance.

Properly handled, assessment policy can provide a ground upon which academic and public interests can legitimately converge. And managing such a convergence is the ultimate challenge of the "new accountability."

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